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Review: Taiwan's Tzu Chi as Engaged Buddhism : Origins, Organization, Appeal and Social Impact - Yu-Shuang Yao

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TAIWAN'S TZU CHI AS ENGAGED BUDDHISM: ORIGINS, ORGANIZATION, APPEAL AND SOCIAL IMPACT. By YU-SHUANG YAO. pp. xiv, 243. Leiden/Boston, Global Oriental, 2012.
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Buddhism in Taiwan has been the subject of a number of remarkable publications in Western languages in the last fifteen years. Some monographs have explored its history and thus the creation of a Taiwanese Buddhism,¹ others have addressed particular Buddhist groups and lay association that had been established on the island,² and a few have focused on the interaction between the main Taiwanese Buddhist organisations and local politics.³ Yao added another important monograph to the field of study of Buddhism in Taiwan. Similarly to Julia C. Huang's book (2009), *Taiwan's Tzu Chi as Engaged Buddhism* assesses the charisma of the founder of Tzu Chi, the nun Zhengyan (b.1937). Then similarly to Laliberté's book (2004), this monograph considers the social impact of the organisation on local society as well as the cooperation between religious body and government. In contrast to previous studies of Tzu Chi, this volume frames Tzu Chi as a New Religious Movement, and associates it to the New Religious Movements founded previously in Japan and those local to Taiwan. In line with this thesis, Yao translates *Ciji gongde hui* as Tzu Chi Movement instead of the usual English rendition as Tzu Chi Foundation.

The book starts with a summary of the social and political history of Taiwan and then goes into the details of the religious landscape of the island. Yao defines Daoism, the presence of Christianity, the folk religions (that are here called 'Traditional Religions'), the New Religious Movements established in Taiwan and those of Japanese origins that spread in Taiwan, and finally discusses the situation of Buddhism in Taiwan after the Japanese colonial period, including the increased importance of the laity among the Buddhist community. The second chapter lists sources, theoretical discourses and research methodologies that the author adopted in her work. A valid contribution of this volume is the sociological research around the concept of 'religious appeal' that, as Yao argues, has been undervalued in previous studies of religious phenomena. Yao relies on an impressive selection of Taiwanese sources, but fails to consult important Western previous works in the field (such as Jones 1999, Laliberté 2004 and Madsen 2007). The third chapter covers the life of Zhengyan, founder of Tzu Chi, and the history of the association. To develop both topics Yao uses historical materials, the interviews conducted during her fieldwork, and the media representation of Tzu Chi. Yao makes an important point by underlining that Zhengyan undertook a Buddhist monastic career for "social reasons rather than religious calling" (p. 66), and analyzing Zhengyan's charisma not only through the lens of Weberian theories but also, and especially, within the frame of Chinese traditional Confucian canons (pp. 68–70). In line with her sociological approach, Yao underlines how the location of the first centre – and now headquarters – of Tzu Chi facilitated the success of the movement (p. 78). The fourth chapter offers interesting insights on Zhengyan's Buddhism, which also constitute the doctrinal bases of the movement and roots of appeal to its members. According to Yao, Zhengyan has based her preaching on the following key points: the concept of individual and collective *karma*, the moral value of an active altruism, the importance of maintaining a focus on the present life (and so on family and social responsibilities) more than on the afterlife, the dichotomy sacred/profane and spiritual wealth/secular wealth. Because

¹Charles B. Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan* (Honolulu, 1999).

²For Foguangshan see Stuart Chandler, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspectives on Modernization and Globalization* (Honolulu, 2004); For Tzu Chi Foundation see Julia C. Huang, (2009) *Charisma and Compassion: Cheng Yen and the Buddhist Tzu Chi Movement* (Cambridge, Mass, 2009).

³Among the others: André Laliberté, *The Politics of Buddhist Organizations in Taiwan, 1989–2003: Safeguarding the Faith, Building a Pure Land, Helping the Poor*, (London, 2004); Richard Madsen, *Democracy's Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan* (Los Angeles, 2007).

of the interpretation of these principles and the creation of a new form of morality, Tzu Chi should be considered as a new religion in Taiwan, Yao indeed calls it “a *new secular Buddhist movement*” (p. 104). In the fifth chapter the author looks at the educational, environmental, occupational and religious background of Tzu Chi members, and highlights an important point, “[m]ost of the Tzu Chi members identified themselves as Taiwanese rather than Chinese” (p. 113), which remarks the Taiwanese identity of the group. Yao reports a well-known feature of Tzu Chi, which is the tolerance towards non-Buddhist beliefs, but also adds that “the more the members were involved with Tzu Chi the more religiously exclusivist they would become” (p. 125), a fact that shows the implicit sectarian nature of the movement. In Chapter Six Yao publishes another less-known characteristic of Tzu Chi, which is the obligation for new members to identify and canvass additional recruits – and thus deliver further financial sponsorship – as a requirement for successful completion of their ‘probation’ period and becoming official Tzu Chi personnel. More importantly, she explains how both modes of recruitment and the central role played by the leader’s charisma are similar to those adopted by previous New Religious Movements in both Taiwan and Japan. In this way Yao supports her thesis that Tzu Chi should be considered as a New Religious Movement. The study of membership and structure of Tzu Chi continues in the following chapter. Here the author frames the analysis of the process of initiation, membership and leadership in Tzu Chi within the parameters of new religious movements, so to reveal further evidence that Tzu Chi should well be classified as such. According to Yao “the Movement has deliberately minimized its religious significance in favour of missionary operations within its internal organization” (p. 163), this is reminiscent of Jim Beckford’s definition of ‘mass organization’. The reception of the figure of Zhengyan by Tzu Chi members and the myth-making process of her figures are, Yao argues, other shared points with the New Religious Movements. The eighth chapter analyses the criteria of appeal to Tzu Chi. Yao underlines six main reasons of appeal: the charitable nature of Tzu Chi Movement, the recruiting strategy, the curiosity around Tzu Chi, the sense of community and belonging that the membership provides (and so, Yao argues, Tzu Chi is similar to Soka Gakkai), the charisma of the leader (and Yao here continues the assessment of the previous chapter especially using Weber’s definition of charisma) and the areligious character of the Movement. This point is another interesting argument that is carried out in other sections of the book as well: on the one hand the leader of the organisation is conceptualised in religious terms, on the other hand members understand Tzu Chi ethics as secular values that are not exclusively Buddhist. The latter trait lists Tzu Chi as a secularised movement, which reflects aspects of Western Christianity and is a more suitable contemporary definition. The final chapter evaluates how Tzu Chi is in line with mainstream Buddhism of Taiwan but also takes distance from it. Yao argues that Tzu Chi could be classified as ‘church movement’ in the Benton Johnson’s sense of the term, or ‘sect movement’, and underlines how Tzu Chi embodies the main features of a ‘new religious movement’ that Rodney Stark had listed in his theoretical work. Yao concludes her monograph with updated data from a recent fieldwork that, she asserts, can further confirm that “Tzuchi has become an independent new religion”, (p. 227).

This monograph is recommended to students and scholars interested in modern religion, Buddhism in Taiwan and contemporary China and East Asian studies. <s.travagnin@rug.nl>

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